

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	7222 Blair Road, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Takoma Park Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	May 3, 2012		Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	12-119	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Anne Brockett		New Construction

Christine Yahoudy, owner of 7222 Blair Road NW seeks the Board's review of a project that will relocate the driveway, reorient the garage, and result in alterations to the landscape at her home in the Takoma Park Historic District. The house was built along with its reverse twin at 7220 Blair in 1912 by owner/builder L.P. Shoemaker to the designs of Julius Germuiller.

This corner building has suffered the loss of its porch and the installation of faux stone cladding on the lower level and asbestos shingles on the upper floor, but it has retained its overall integrity. The garage at the rear of the property faces north to Fern Place and was present by 1928 after Fern was cut through.

Project Description

The owner seeks to move the driveway from Fern Place to Blair Road, creating a new curb cut, to better accommodate the grade changes on the property and provide an accessible entry at the rear of the house. The new curb cut and driveway would feature parallel paved strips that lead along the south side of the property to the rear yard. A grade change on the Blair Road side may necessitate a retaining wall along the south side of the driveway and a four foot tall retaining wall (Wall A on plan) is proposed. No information about materials or the necessity of this wall has been presented.

The garage door would be relocated from the Fern side to face Blair and the new driveway. The former garage opening would then be infilled with parged concrete block and the former driveway covered over with dirt. Because the owner also wishes to create a flat rear yard, a retaining wall approximately five feet in height would be necessary on the north side of the property. In February 2012, construction began on this wall, which continues an existing retaining wall on the Fern Place side of the property, but is 2-3 feet taller. The wall, which directly abuts the sidewalk, was begun without permits and the job was stopped by DCRA's inspectors.

As part of the project, the existing chain-link fence would be replaced with a wood picket fence. At the front and side, this fence would be 3½ feet tall, but would change to 6 feet beginning at the side bay, across the closed driveway, and toward the rear of the property. This 6 foot tall fence would stand directly behind the proposed (and partially constructed) 5 foot tall wall, for a total height ranging between 10 and 12 feet directly abutting the Fern Place sidewalk.

Finally, the owner would like to widen an existing paved walk on the north side of the house around the projecting bay. No information was submitted on dimensions or what support would be structurally necessary to accommodate this change.

An application has been filed with the Public Space Commission for all of the above work.

Evaluation

The new driveway would match that of the twin house next door and would allow the owner to use the garage, which is not currently possible because of the slope of the current driveway. The Board has supported new curb cuts and driveways previously where old driveways are removed, resulting in no net gain of paving within historic districts and preserving their open space character. As an alternative treatment, HPO would support a gravel drive as this material would be compatible for a house of this age.

Because the garage is square with a pyramidal roof, it lends itself to any orientation, and relocating the door to face east would not change its character. However, the material to fill in the current opening warrants additional consideration. The garage is frame with a brick face on the Fern Street side only. The owner proposes to infill the opening with concrete parged to match the retaining wall. Because of the frame construction of the garage, a horizontal wood board that matches the current cladding would be more compatible. Leaving the opening with a garage door is also appropriate as this would allow the history and evolution of this building to be understood. Both of these options would also be reversible.

As proposed and started, leveling the backyard and constructing a retaining wall of the height needed to accommodate such a change in grade is problematic. The wall that has been partially erected along the Fern Place sidewalk is unusually tall, especially directly abutting the sidewalk, and impacts the open character of the streetscape in Takoma Park. When coupled with the application for a 6 foot tall fence, for a height of approximately 11 feet above the sidewalk grade, the result would be quite uncharacteristic in an early DC suburban development, which, as its name implies, was meant to retain its park-like qualities.

The staff offers two suggestions to improve the compatibility of these alterations. The first is to continue the height of the original retaining wall (lowering it where it has already been raised) and grade the lawn down to meet the wall. This wall should stand no taller than 3½ feet, which is the standard fence height in historic districts. The HPO recommends that the 6 foot tall fence be set back by at least a foot from the wall to allow for more planting in front of the fence. Alternately, a second retaining wall could be placed several feet back from the first wall to allow for a more level backyard. The setback would allow for a planting bed between the two walls to keep the green space characteristic of the streetscape and disguise the taller retaining wall. In this scenario, the rear yard fence would be located behind the secondary retaining wall to create a planting area and alleviate the looming height from the pedestrian level.

The parged finish proposed for the concrete wall is compatible with the existing property, but brick or carefully selected dark grey rubble or squared-and-snecked stones would also be acceptable finish materials.

The low front yard fence is compatible with other fences in the neighborhood, however, the HPO does not have enough information to comment on the proposed widening of the side pathway. It is worth noting, however, that meeting ADA standards is not required on private property and may not be necessary to make this path accessible.

Recommendations

- 1) The HPO recommends that the Board find that the project is compatible with the character of the historic district and consistent with the preservation act, with the following conditions:
 - The new retaining wall be no higher than 3½ feet along the sidewalk

- If desired, a secondary retaining wall of no more than 5 feet above the sidewalk grade be constructed with sufficient room for a planting bed to be installed between the two walls
 - The 6 foot high rear yard fence should be placed at least several feet behind the uppermost retaining wall.
- 2) The HPO further recommends that the Board direct the applicant to prepare professional quality plans and elevations of all proposed alterations for further consideration and to work with the staff on design details of the side retaining walls and fences, the garage door infill material, and the necessity and details of a retaining wall at the new curb cut.
 - 3) Finally, the HPO requests delegation of final approval to staff.